**Meter in Poetry and Verse**

[**http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html**](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html)

**Meter in poetry and verse**

......In verse and poetry, meter is a recurring pattern of stressed (accented, or long) and unstressed (unaccented, or short) syllables in lines of a set length. For example, suppose a line contains ten syllables (set length) in which the first syllable is unstressed, the second is stressed, the third is unstressed, the fourth is stressed, and so on until the line reaches the tenth syllable. The line would look like the following one (the opening line of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18") containing a pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables. The unstressed syllables are in blue and the stressed syllables in red.

Shall **I** com **PARE** thee **TO** a **SUM** mer’s **DAY**?

Each pair of unstressed and stressed syllables makes up a unit called a **foot**. The line contains five feet in all, as shown next:

....1.............. 2.................3..............4................ 5   
Shall.**I..|..**com.**PARE..|..**thee.**TO..|..**a.**SUM..|..**mer’s **DAY**?

.......A foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (as above) is called an **iamb**. Because there are five feet in the line, all iambic, the **meter** of the line is **iambic pentameter**. The prefix *pent* in *pentameter* means *five* (Greek: *penta, five*). *Pent* is joined to words or word roots to form new words indicating five. For example, the Pentagon in Washington has five sides, the Pentateuch of the Bible consists of five books, and a pentathlon in a sports event has five events. Thus, poetry lines with five feet are in pentameter.   
.......Some feet in verse and poetry have different stress patterns. For example, one type of foot consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one. Another type consists of a stressed one followed by an unstressed one. In all, there are six types of feet:   
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|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Iamb (Iambic) | Unstressed + Stressed | Two Syllables |
| Trochee (Trochaic) | Stressed + Unstressed | Two Syllables |
| Spondee (Spondaic) | Stressed + Stressed | Two Syllables |
| Anapest (Anapestic) | Unstressed + Unstressed + Stressed | Three Syllables |
| Dactyl (Dactylic | Stressed + Unstressed + Unstressed | Three Syllables |
| Pyrrhic | Unstressed + Unstressed | Two Syllables |

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The length of lines—and thus the meter—can also vary. Following are the types of meter and the line length:   
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|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Monometer | One Foot |  |  |  |
| Dimeter | Two Feet |  |  |  |
| Trimeter | Three Feet |  |  |  |
| Tetrameter | Four Feet |  |  |  |
| Pentameter | Five Feet |  |  |  |
| Hexameter | Six Feet |  |  |  |
| Heptameter | Seven Feet |  |  |  |
| Octameter | Eight Feet |  |  |  |

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.......Meter is determined by the type of foot and the number of feet in a line. Thus, a line with three iambic feet is known as iambic trimeter. A line with six dactylic feet is known as dactylic hexameter.

**Examples From Poems**

Following are additional examples feet and meter combinations.

**Iambic Pentameter**From "On His Blindness," by John Milton

      1.............2............. 3...............4..............5   
When **I**..|..con **SID**..|..er **HOW**..|..my **LIFE**..|..is **SPENT**   
       1.................2.............. 3..................4...................4   
Ere **HALF**..|..my **DAYS**..|..in **THIS**..|..dark **WORLD**..|..and **WIDE**

**Mixed Meter With Iambic Feet**From "Intimations of Immortality," by William Wordsworth

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| .........1...............2.................3.....................4......................5  There **WAS**..|..a **TIME**..|..when **MEAD**..|..ow, **GROVE**,..|..and **STREAM**, | Iambic Pentameter |
| .........1................2...............3................4.  The **EARTH**,..|..and **EV**..|..ry **COM**..|..mon **SIGHT**, | Iambic Tetrameter |
| .....1..............2  To **ME**..|..did **SEEM** | Iambic Dimeter |
| ......1..............2.............3...............4  Ap **PAR**..|..elled **IN**..|..cel **EST**..|..ial **LIGHT**, | Iambic Tetrameter |
| ........1..............2.................3................4.................5  The **GLOR**..|..y **AND**..|..the **FRESH**..|..ness **OF**..|..a **DREAM**. | Iambic Pentameter |
| ..1.............2.............3.............4..................5  It **IS**..|..not **NOW**..|..as **IT**..|..hath **BEEN**..|..of **YORE**; | Iambic Pentameter |
| ........1....................2.............3  Turn **WHERE**..|..so **E'ER**..|..I **MAY**, | Iambic Trimeter |
| .......1..............2  By **NIGHT**..|..or **DAY**, | Iambic Dimeter |
| ..........1...............2.................3................4................5..............6  The **THINGS**..|..which **I**..|..have **SEEN**..|..I **NOW**..|..can **SEE**..|..no **MORE**. | Iambic Hexameter |

**Anapestic Tetrameter**From "The Destruction of Sennacherib," by George Gordon Lord Byron

........1.......................2..........................3......................4   
The As **SYR**..|..ian came **DOWN**..|..like the **WOLF**..|..on the **FOLD**,   
........1.......................2..........................3....................4   
And his **CO**..|..horts were **GLEAM**..|..ing in **PUR**..|..ple and **GOLD**;    
.........1.........................2.............................3.......................4   
And the **SHEEN**..|..of their **SPEARS**..|..was like **STARS**..|..on the **SEA**

**Trochaic Tetrameter**From "The Tyger," by William Blake

....1.............2...............3.................4   
**TY** ger..|..**TY** ger..|..**BURN** ning..|..**BRIGHT**   
....1...............2...............3............4   
**IN** the..|..**FOR**..ests..|..**OF** the..|..**NIGHT**

These lines contain trochaic feet—consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. But the final foot of each line is incomplete, containing only a stressed syllable. An incomplete foot at the end of a line is called **catalexis**, and *bright* and *night* are called **catalectic feet**. The meter of these lines is trochaic tetrameter—tetrameter because they each contain three complete feet and one incomplete foot, for a total of four feet. A complete foot at the end of a line is called **acatalexis**. The final feet in the stanza under [Mixed Meter With Iambic Feet](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html#Mixed) are all **acatalectic**.